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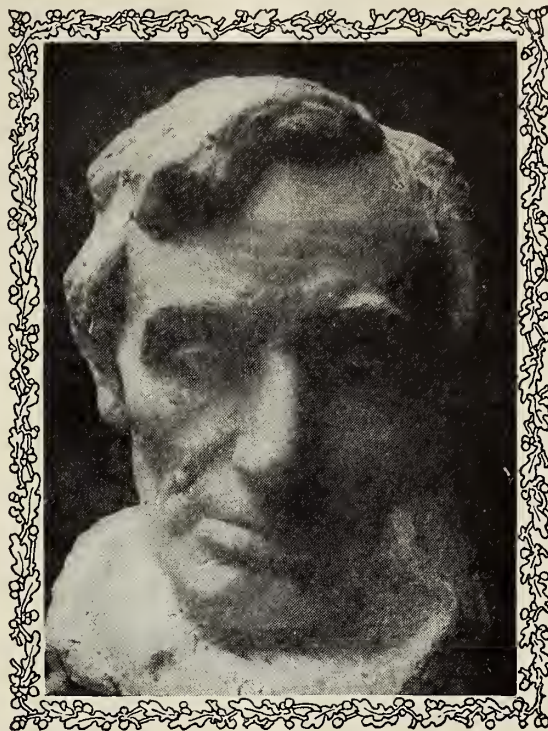
IBSEN AND LINCOLN

IN spite of all the volumes that Abraham Lincoln has inspired, the record of Henrik Ibsen's impressions on hearing of his assassination has strangely escaped the notice of the historian and the biographer.

The poem which we print on the opposite page has been unknown these forty years. It was written in Rome at a time of unparalleled stimulus in Ibsen's career, when his mind was seething with new ideas and dreams of "renewal" largely occupied his thought. He was working then with earnestness on his great "foe-of-compromise" play, "Brand," which, appearing in the same year, established his fame.

The burden of nations was upon the young poet's shoulders. Letters written at this period display his sympathy for the misfortunes of Poland and burn with indignation at the revels of the Germans after their capture of Düppel in the Danish War of 1864. Some knowledge of these events is necessary to the understanding of the poem, and especially of the third stanza. Ibsen passed through Berlin just after the Danish War and was an unwilling witness of the triumphal entry of the German troops. He saw the rabble spit into the mouths of the cannon from Düppel and it seemed to him an omen of the way that history would one day scorn Sweden and Norway for their base desertion of Denmark.

In Rome he found little to console him in the conduct of his fellow Scandinavians. "What will you think," he writes, "when I tell you that even Danish men and women sat among the Germans in the chapel of the Prussian Embassy on Sundays while the war was going on and listened devoutly to the Prussian clergyman praying for the success of the Prussian arms in the just war against their enemy?" It was just at this moment of stress that the news came across the Atlantic of Abraham Lincoln's assassination. The calamity which had overtaken the younger world at its period of renewal produced a profound impression upon Ibsen. He gave vent to his feelings in this stirring poem, which, strangely enough, has escaped the notice of Lincoln historians. In the original the meter is very irregular, doubtless with intention. The translation given here follows the text as closely as possible.—THE EDITOR.



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THE DEATH OF LINCOLN

BY HENRIK IBSEN

They fired a shot over you in the West,
And Europe awakened from sleep;
Lo, 'mongst the courtiers, silken-dressed,
Deadly alarums creep.
Old Europe, thou with order and law,
With maxims that never fail,
With a name unstained by blemish or flaw,
With virtuous wrath that holds in awe, —
Then grewest thou strangely pale!

In mourning is stamped the unicorn,
The eagle, each nation's seal;
Swift packets over the sea are borne;
Despatches the truth reveal.
The cotton-monarchs, men of fame,
In hosts from the land of lies,
The branch of peace to gather, came —
With a single pistol's crack and flame
He falls — the One Man dies!

And so ye sages of Europe took fright!
Why at *this* grieve ye the more?
A Prussian deed, the Düppelers' slight,
The world had witnessed before.
No raven hath ever his brother slain —
Does Poland come into your mind?
Or at Copenhagen the English gain?
Or the Flensburg grave? Or Sönderburg's bane?
What anger *now* do ye find?

The ruddy flower that yonder glows,
And startles you with its gloom,
Is only the graft of our Europe-rose,
In richer earth a-bloom.
You planted this scion of your land,
That reddens the soil of the West;
'Tis *you* who with your very own hand
Have bound the blood-stained martyrs' band
On Abraham Lincoln's breast.

With vows forgotten and oaths insincere,
With sheaves of treaties unsound,
With promises broken from year to year,
Ye have fertilized history's ground.
And now, even now, ye expect it to bear
A crop of the noblest strain.
Lo, your seed is grown! At a ruddy flare
Ye marvel, beholding everywhere
A harvest of daggers for grain!

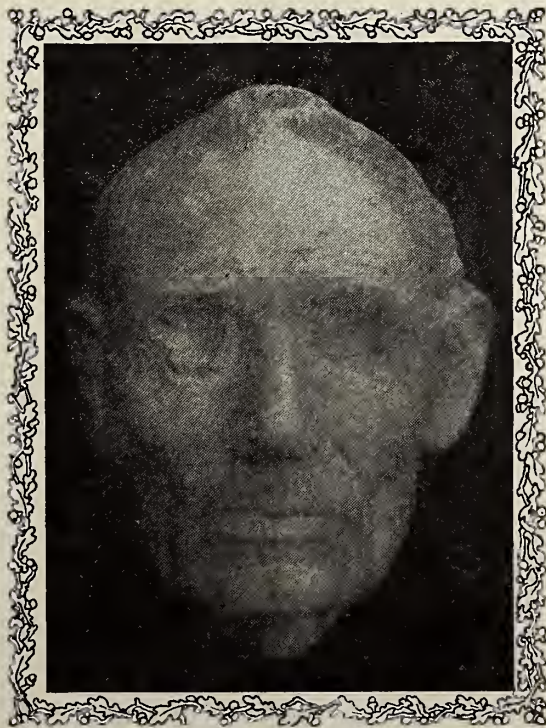
Where law abides at the point of the knife,
And justice the gallows can sway,
Is nearer and surer the dawn of new life
Than here where with *words* ye slay.
A Will is awaking and bringing its doom
To hurl down the fabric of lies;
But the worm must first eat his way in the tomb,
And Time must other garments assume
Till in caricature he dies.

There ruleth a Spirit, eternally just,
Whose power ye cannot gainsay;
He bade Domus Aurea lie in the dust
And Nero's colossus decay.

But first had the vices of Rome to go
O'er the earth from pole to pole,
And tyrants be deified here below,
And emperors' golden statues glow
Like gods on the Capitol.

They crumbled together, both circus and hall,
Temples and columns fell low;
Arcades and arches were trampled small
By the hoofs of the buffalo.
Men builded anew on the old, old ground,
And clean was the air for a time;
But the new life in turn its warning hath found;
Now rises the pest, from the swamp unbound,
And is wafted from clime to clime.

But although in the swamp of corruption we go,
I cry not "Woe is me,"
For the poison-flowers that flaunting grow
In clusters on Time's fair tree.
Let the worm gnaw on till the shell is bare,
Nor roof nor wall shall decay;
Let the "system" on to its ruin fare,
The sooner will vengeance its doom prepare,
On Hypocrisy's latest day!



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